

# Growing Old Gracefully

*East Window, July 1998*

At the time of the Festival of Britain in 1951 there were only 300 people over the age of 100. But the year 2030 there are likely to be 34 thousand. A staggering increase. At the same time, the birth rate is dropping. In 1961 there were four people of working age to sustain each pensioner. By 2030 there will be only two.

For older people to live out their lives with dignity in future, these are just some of the crucial issues which will have to be faced. The government is due to provide us with a White Paper this summer and we look forward to that with anticipation.

When thinking of the problems of ageing, we might be prompted to call to mind the words of Jesus to Peter by the Lakeside: *"I tell you most truly, when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go."*

Peter was being pointed towards his own death, but those words resonate with us all when we consider the stripping away of autonomy and independence which invariably comes with old age. Perhaps that stripping is the hardest thing to contemplate as we think about our own future, whether it will be caused by loss of income, the loss of a partner or the loss of our health and strength.

But although it can be a very painful experience, this stripping away of autonomy has for some the potential to become a source of great insight for those who are prepared to look more carefully. An elderly and house-bound woman was telling me recently that as she lost her independence, so she was becoming more aware that, although when she was younger she may have convinced herself of her independence, she can now see that that was just a myth. Put us on a desert island, and most of us would not last a week. For the human being is not self-sustaining, even though our society pretends that we are. Independence is perhaps our society's biggest lie. We depend upon one another all the time.

And as that elderly lady grew even more dependent she told me that she was learning something else too.

As each of her props was being taken from her, so she realised that not one of them was worthy of her whole confidence. "The nearer you get to death, the more you learn about what it might be that you can really rely upon. And it's certainly not your money." In the end, there is only God.

My elderly friend's wisdom was very impressive. It reminded me of Jesus, the One who was stripped bare of all refinement and outward support for our sake. And as he was stripped of his autonomy and independence, just as we are in our old age, so he became even more a figure of extraordinary importance and remarkable dignity.

Our society must learn the strong lessons of growing old, and respect our senior citizens for all that their experience has to teach us.

+Laurie Bradwell